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THE MADERA COUNTY HISTORIAN

MADERA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY

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"THOUSANDS CHEER ON ARRIVAL OF THE McDONALD!"

(Perhaps there are some people in Madera and Fresno who recall this exciting event. We are printing this story because it records a very important event in Madera and Fresno Counties)

The Fresno Morning Republican, dated Friday, June 16, 1911, records the following story:

The consummation of a freight trip from San Francisco to Fresno by river was celebrated at the Skaggs Bridge landing with a brief ceremony on the barge "East Side."

Marking a new step in the history of transportation development in California, the steamer "J. R. McDonald" - Captain C. P. McMurtry commanding and with the barge "East Side" in tow, arrived shortly before 10 o'clock yesterday morning (Thursday, June 15, 1911) at Skaggs bridge, twelve miles from Fresno. Her arrival marked the end of a journey on which freight was transported entirely by water from San Francisco and Stockton to within teaming distance of Fresno and Madera, demonstrating two points advanced by a Fresno committee that has been working on to have the San Joaquin River opened to permanent navigation as far as Herndon. The first point is that the San Joaquin is actually navigable for miles above the Skaggs bridge by steamers carrying large cargoes. The second point is that there is a real and well defined need for improvement of a waterway that is today neglected through its entire length above the Stockton Slough.

The steamer was greeted at Skaggs Bridge by about 2000 people, who joined in three rousing cheers for the steamer and her skipper. The people swarmed all over the boat as soon as she was made fast to the landing.

The "J. R. McDonald" was the first steamer to plow the waters above the Miller and Lux dam, opposite Mendota, since the year 1869. Approximately 123 tons of freight was carried for Fresno and Madera.

Since the arrival of the steamer marked an opportunity to inaugurate a new order of things for the betterment of this section of the Valley, the arrival of the expedition was celebrated yesterday by the re-christening of the big barge "East Side." Miss Marian Hammond, in the presence of hundreds who covered the barge, the steamer, the bridge and the adjoining bank, smashed a bottle of San Joaquin river water against the port cavil, with the words: "I christen thee "Fresno" and long may you ply the river thereon."

Then Mayor Rowell and members of the committee that had arranged the trip spoke briefly from the top of a heap of freight on the barge, emphasizing the success of the entire venture, demonstrating every point that Fresno has endeavored to make in its efforts to interest the National Government in the improvement of this river for permanent navigation. All credit was given to the skill of Captain McMurtry, a veteran of the river trade, in bringing the steamer over the river in places almost unknown to her destination within the time set when she cast off from her wharf at Stockton.

The greeting given the boat was enthusiastic in the extreme. When she had passed without even a hitch through the Miller and Lux dam, regarded by many people as an effective bar to navigation, she steamed rapidly up the finest stretch of river encountered anywhere in the entire voyage. Wide turns and deep water allowed her to move along without a single delay such as navigators have always found in the slough sections of the river.

By nightfall, Captain McMurtry believing himself to be in easy steaming distance of Skaggs bridge, and disliking to travel through almost unknown waters in the dark, tied up in a little bay for the night. At 3:30 A.M. today, the boat was steamed up and put underway. The river, all the way to Skaggs bridge, continued to prove bigger and straighter than any above the City of Stockton.

Almost from earliest daylight, people flocked to the river bank to wave to the steamer as she puffed by, making about six miles an hour against a stiff current. At one point laughter convulsed the voyagers as they watched an enthusiast climb to the top of a tank house and wave his shirt, in lieu of a better banner.

The arrival at Skaggs, set for 9 o'clock, would have been on time had it not been for one difficulty encountered in the practically unknown river. About 8 o'clock the steamer took a channel around an island, only to find the channel's head divided into five small sloughs. An attempt was made to pass through one of these, but the current proved too stiff, and the barge was swung ashore. The steamer was heaved out by means of passing a line to a willow ashore and working a crew at the capstan, then she ran down an open channel on the other side of the island, came up behind the barge, pulled her out of her unfortunate position, dropped back to the lower end of the island and came up the open channel. About an hour was lost by not knowing the open course about this island.

Two hundred yards above, the vanguard of the crowd that came out from Fresno to welcome the steamer was met. President Wylie M. Giffen of the Chamber of Commerce and Chief of Police William Shaw of Fresno met the boat on the bank about two miles from the bridge. On the other shore, a hundred yards above, was a group of automobiles containing the committee and press representatives. Other automobiles joined these, until the steamer finished her eventful cruise of a few hours short of a week, accompanied by a procession of cars several hundred yards long.

At the bridge and on the bank on the Madera side where the boat made fast was collected a crowd estimated at 2000 people. The steamer's whistle gave three blasts of welcome and three more in answer to cheers from the shore. At least 250 autos were on the Madera shore.

This incident must not be omitted in this story: The Stars and Stripes, a school flag, fluttered from the vessel's "Jackstaff." This flag was the school flag from Mendota. The staff had been broken in the rough places in the river below and the ship's flag had accidentally been left on the dock at Stockton. However, the committeemen in charge had entered the school house at Mendota, secured the flag and motored with it to the Miller and Lux dam where it was placed on board while the steamer was pulling through. To hold the flag the old "jackstaff" was repaired enroute and shipped when clear river below the bridge was reached.

When the vessel tied alongside the shore, a crowd of hundreds surged aboard and every available foot of the steamer and barge was soon packed with humanity, while Captain McMurtry held a reception in his pilot house.

Mayor Rowell and members of the committee were introduced to the Captain. J. J. Murray of Kearney Boulevard came aboard and presented to the Captain a large bouquet of carnations and two boxes of cigars.

All day, a continuous crowd of people came to view the steamer. It is estimated that at least 3,000 people from Fresno, Madera and nearby ranches visited the vessel before nightfall.

The work of unloading was begun Friday afternoon. Among the Fresno firms receiving freight were Holland and Holland, Woodward Company, Kutner-Goldstein, Fisher-Glassford, T. J. Hammond, Moore Plate Company and others; from Madera were Rochdale Company, Rosenthal-Kutner and from Kerman, the Kerman Mercantile Company.

Three motor trucks loaded to the limit, went into Fresno. Fifteen tons were loaded onto fourteen mule team wagons.

The ship was to sail late the following day. There was to be some freight down river for the return trip.

Captain McMurtry began preparing for some high water on the return trip.

The ship's company included twenty one people.

The steamer left Stockton at 10 o'clock on Friday, June 9. Freight was delivered at Hill's Ferry. Saturday, good river was found; three days were spent in the slough country, demonstrating the disadvantages resulting from the dissipation of the river waters over the whole flooded area. The shallowest water was here and the worst bends. Above Dos Palos, the boat traveled on "big river." The part of the river within Fresno County proved the very best encountered.

Some questions that arose after the successful voyage were presented to the crowd as they listened to the speakers of the day:

1. Will navigation interfere with irrigation? (When the vessel passed through the great dam at Mendota of Miller and Lux, without injuring a splinter, this question was in a large part answered.)

2. Can regular navigation ever be conducted successfully and profitably?

3. How much freight is brought annually into Fresno, Madera and nearby towns?

Speakers T. J. Hammond, W. F. Chandler and Mayor Chester Rowell urged that everyone give support to further the research and that ridicule be abandoned. Wylie Giffen stated that ridicule is the most difficult of all opposition to be overcome. He urged the support of everyone in the community in the effort to make navigation a fixed thing on the river. In closing T. J. Hammond thanked Captain McMurtry, Pilot Whitney Cornwall and First Officer Thomas Holdsworth for their skill in bringing the vessel through the unknown river reaches.

In conclusion, we wish to state that we have no concrete information as to how much navigation took place on the San Joaquin in the Valley after the successful trip of the J. R. McDonald - we are simply relating here the story of a very exciting day in Fresno and Madera Counties on June 16, 1911. We have, for the most part, written this story in the same style as the original newspaper version, keeping in mind that this event took place sixty years ago.

SKAGGS BRIDGE

The above picture will help the reader visualize the area where the "McDonald" anchored for the day. The present bridge is very near the spot where the old wooden bridge was.

CAPTAIN CHARLES P. McMURTRY

Captain C. P. McMurtry was a veteran of river navigation and first sailed the upper San Joaquin in 1868. He expressed his opinion, founded on the voyage of June 1911 as follows: "The river should be navigable as far as Herndon. It would be navigable for six months of an average year, just as it is, with a steamer built for the purpose, to draw a little less than the McDonald. Of course some work would have to be done on the worst stretches of the river, putting up levees to stop sloughs that now take too much water from the river. Some straightening would be desirable, but with boats built for the purpose I believe we could go right now up as far as old Millerton if immovable bridges were not in the way."

J. R. McDONALD

Quite by accident we came upon the story of James R. McDonald, the man for whom the "J. R. McDonald" was named. It will perhaps be of interest to our readers to know a little about the man.

We have no idea what became of the steamer "J. R. McDonald." If anyone has knowledge of this, please inform the Madera County Historical Society and we will print it in our next Historian.

James R. McDonald was one of California's early honored pioneers. Mr. McDonald will long be remembered both as a political and business factor of the country and a citizen whose moral influence would be impossible to measure. For over 50 years he gave his best efforts toward the development of natural resources; toward enterprises that would promote the material welfare of the community where he resided, and to the moral uplifting of all with whom he came in contact.

Mr. McDonald spent at least 30 years in Grayson, in Stanislaus County, and he is still remembered there as an outstanding citizen. Mr. McDonald lived in other parts of California: on a sheep ranch in the Livermore Hills; some time in San Francisco, Hayward, Walnut Creek (was postmaster there), Healdsburg (where he had a general store), but in 1869 he located in Grayson, where he opened a store. He also was Wells Fargo Agent here for many years.

The political career of J. R. McDonald was one of intense interest also. He participated in many of the important movements in the early history of the State. He was elected State Treasurer in 1890; was nominated for Governor in 1894, but was defeated.

Mr. McDonald was very interested in navigation and Grayson was the head of river navigation - enormous quantities of grain was shipped from there.

Mr. McDonald was also very prominent in the Presbyterian Church. He was sent as a commissioner of the church from California to Pittsburg, Pa.

Mr. McDonald was born in Belead, Scotland, on September 17, 1828 - one of twelve children. The family moved first to Illinois in 1834. He came to California in 1850. He was interested in many things, but whatever he tried he became successful. He was always concerned about people and ways to make living conditions better for others.

Mr. McDonald was married twice and had five children. He died in 1902 at the age of 74. This one line tells his story: "A man who loved his fellow men." The life story of this man is long - we have just touched the high spots, as you might wonder why the steamer was named the "J. R. McDonald."

LIGHT AT LAST
(Mar. 9, 1894)

Madera has come out of the darkness into the full glare of electric light, for last night the engine was set going in the Electric Light company's building, the switch was put on, and the bright light leaped from the incandescent bulbs in the stores about town lighting up the city as it had never been lit up before.

Electric lights have been looked forward to by the progressive citizens of this city for a long time for Madera has long since left the swaddling clothes of babyhood behind her, and wished to view her robust form by the mellow lights of electricity.

There was a large crowd of people on the streets last night when the lights were turned on. The lamps had been lit, giving out a dirty, yellow light which was more pronounced when the electric lights were turned on.

THE MADERA COUNTY HISTORIAN

The Madera County Historian was started in 1961 by Nathan Sweet. We are beginning on our eleventh year. The last quarter of 1970 marks the publication of the 10th Volume - 40 different issues. We have copies of all issues and have most of them for sale at 50¢ a copy. The following is a Table of contents from January 1961 to October 1970:

1961

Vol. I, No. 1
Miscellaneous edition, comments on meetings for the year plus a story "The Iron Horse Advances" by Guy Crow.

Vol. I, No. 2
Articles on "An 1876 Harvest" by Nathan Sweet.
"History of the Fremont Westfall Family" by Arch Westfall.
"An Early Trip to Yosemite" by Mrs. Muriel W. Sweet.

Vol. I, No. 3
"From An 1880 Diary" edited by Mr. & Mrs. H. Clay Daulton.

Vol. I, No. 4
"One Hundred Years of History, Foster's Hogue Ranch" by Doris and Clyde Foster.

Vol. I, Supplement
"Roster of Fremont's Calif. Battalion, Mexican War 1846."

1962

Vol. II, No. 1
"The George Washington Mordecai Family," related to Nathan Sweet by Louise and Brooke F. Mordecai.
"Early Families of Madera County" by Mildred Eaves.

Vol. II, No. 2
"Chowchilla Beginnings" by Archie E. Marston.
"[illegible]dian Peak" by Gertrude Hopper.

Vol. II, No. 3
"California Mission Meeting" by Doris E. Foster.
"The Gentleman Stage Robber" by Kenneth Hopper.

Vol. II, No. 4
"California Mission Meeting" by Doris Foster. (Continued from previous issue)
"The Gentleman Stage Robber - Sixteen Years Later" by Kenneth C. Hopper.

1963

Vol. III, No. 1
"History of Use of the Fresno River Water for Irrigation" by Harry Barnes.
"Story of Harry Barnes."
"Traders and Trading Posts" by Nathan Sweet.

Vol. III, No. 2
"Madera County Road Records" by Douglas Houston (former County surveyor)
"Madera Irrigation District Development" by Harry Barnes. (Continued from Vol. III, No. 1)

Vol. III, No. 3
"Our Family Story" by Rose Thurman Chapman and William Melvin.
"Madera County Road Records" by Douglas Houston. (Cont.)

Vol. III, No. 4
"[illegible]even Cunningham" by Nathan Sweet.
"Madera County Road Records" by Douglas Houston. (Cont.)

1964

Vol. IV, No. 1
"Memories of Sugar Pine" by A. L. Peime.

1964 (Cont.)

"William T. Henderson" by Nathan C. Sweet.

Vol. IV, No. 2
Children's stories that were in a story contest involving the North Fork and Coarsegold Schools.

Vol. IV, No. 3
"Introduction to the Mace Diary" by Nathan C. Sweet. Contents of the Diary are given in its entirety, written in 1860.

Vol. IV, No. 4
"Jane Brown's Mountain Vacation." Introduction by Nathan C. Sweet. Diary begins in August 1882.

1965

Vol. V, No. 1
"Tenth Anniversary Issue of the Madera County Historical Society" by Mildred Eaves.

Vol. V, No. 2
"Coming of the Railroad. The Birth and Naming of a Town Berendo" by Guy Crow.

Vol. V, No. 3
Children's stories for contest held with Coarsegold and North Fork.

Vol. V, No. 4
"James D. Savage" by Jane Ellen Curry.
"99th Anniversary of Massacre at Savage's Trading Post Cited" from Madera News Tribune, Dec. 21, 1949

1966

Vol. VI, No. 1
"Story of Capt. R. P. Mace and Family."

Vol. VI, No. 2
"Samuel Gasiway Owens."
"John Marion Jones"
"Traveling in Baja, California, in 1865. The Diary of Wm. T. Henderson." Annotated by Don C. Meadows.

Vol. VI, No. 3
Stories by children of Coarsegold and North Fork Schools.
"Madera County's First Woman Judge." A tribute to Mrs. Marcia Putney.
"A Story of Early Banditry" by Judge Klette.

Vol. VI, No. 4
"The Story of J. W. Schmitz I and Family."

1967

Vol. VII, No. 1
"Gene Tully, Last of the First 60 National Forest Rangers" by June English.
Vol. VII, No. 2
"The Dickenson Family" by Nathan C. Sweet.
Vol. VII, No. 3
"William Martin Sell, Jr." by Mrs. June English.
Vol. VII, No. 4
"The Summit House" by members of Footman family.

1968

Vol. VIII, No. 1
"A Madera Pioneer Family, The Preciados."
Vol. VIII, No. 2
"Fairmead Colony" by Mrs. Bea Fuller Baumback.
Vol. VIII, No. 3
"The Ellises of North Fork" - material compiled from Ellis family contributions.
Vol. VIII, No. 4
"The Story of the Formation of Madera County," compiled by Maud Lindemann.

1969

Vol. IX, No. 1
"Madera County's Historic Courthouse," compiled by Maud Lindemann.
Vol. IX, No. 2
"The Story of the Hunter Drug Co.," told by Gladys Hunter Wilson.
Vol. IX, No. 3
"The Story of Henry Clay Daulton I," compiled by Maud Lindemann.
Vol. IX, No. 4
"The Story of Jonathan Rea I" - material contributed by members of Rea family.

1970

Vol. X, No. 1
"This and That - Here and There in Madera County." Collection of short stories.
Vol. X, No. 2
"The Madera County Library" by Miss Blanche Galloway and others.
Vol. X, No. 3
"The Story of John Ely Chapin." Story provided by Mr. & Mrs. William Ellis.
Vol. X, No. 4
"John G. Smale: Early Madera County Educator," written by John G. Smale.

The Madera County Historical Society held its annual meeting on January 27, 1971, and at that time elected the following officers for 1971:

President	Mr. Ray Page
Vice President	Mr. Rader Roberts
Secretary	Mrs. Ann Page
Treasurer	Miss Rintha Robbins
Directors:	Mr. Forest Shafer
	Mr. William Welton
	Mrs. Elvira Ahles
	Mrs. Uarda Pezalla
Hold-over Directors:	
	Mrs. Evelyn Brown
	Mrs. Lenore Flum
	Mrs. Jessie Potter
	Mrs. Doris Seabury

MEMBERSHIP AND DUES

DUES are DUE! Better pay now. Every member should make an effort to get at least one new member. Our general fund for operating expenses depends on the dues of our members. Let's make a real drive this year and pay our dues and get some more new members. Mail dues to Madera County Historical Society, P. O. Box 478, Madera, Calif. 93637

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The entire credit for the content of the story on the arrival of the "McDonald" goes to the Fresno Morning Republican. The article was brought to our attention by Guy Crow, who found the newspaper and brought it to the Madera County Historical Society Office, and we credit the book "San Joaquin Valley, California, History of the State of California 1905" for our information on J. R. McDonald. This Historian was compiled by Maud Lindemann, Curator. Mrs. Uarda Pezalla typed it for printing.

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